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¶ The “Electra” of Richard Strauss.



“Agamemnon! Agamemnon!
O my father!
I would see thee once again today
As yesterday thou camest, like a shadow!
Agamemnon! Agamemnon!
Approach thy child!”

I

BARELY five minutes have passed since three swift, crashing chords abruptly brushed aside the curtains and disclosed the inner court of the palace at Mycenæ—that sombre pile where murder still remains unavenged. Maids, drawing water from the well, have spoken low, as though afraid of the sound of their own voices. Electra has appeared for a moment and darted back into her lair. The maids have gone. Again Electra comes forth—this time to remain until vengeance is satisfied. Prostrate, calling at the ground as if she would make her voice disintegrate the earth above her father’s remains and

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so penetrate to where he lies, she invokes his shade. Barely five minutes! Yet the finger that pointed to impending tragedy already has become the hand that holds you in its grip and never lets go.

The effect is the same, as when you have read the first few pages of the "Electra" of Sophocles. Fate broods over the most modern and most restless of musical scores, as darkly, as relentlessly as it does over that deliberate and majestic tragedy produced by the Athenian, whose life came within eleven years of spanning the fourth century before Christ. Therein lies Strauss's justification, if he requires any.—But then how many of those who draw the "Electra" of Sophocles into the discussion, have read it?

Had they, I do not understand how they can have failed to perceive that Hugo von Hofmannsthal's play differs from the original by Sophocles, not so much in plot and action as in condensation. If the episodes follow so fast upon each other in the libretto that Electra, instead of remaining a queen of Greek tragedy, becomes the neurotic principal of a modern debacle, that is due to the necessary elimination of the Greek chorus, which interrupts the action with advice and comment; and of strophe,

antistrophe and epodos, which fall, like intermezzos, between the main divisions of the Greek play.

One climax in the original, von Hofmannsthal has omitted, probably because in the modern theatre it would have to take place too far "up stage" to be effective. In the tragedy by Sophocles, when Orestes and his friend, Pylades, have slain Clytemnestra, they cover her with a sheet. When Aegisthus enters, he believes it is the corpse of Orestes that has been brought to Mycenæ as convincing proof of his death. As he is about to raise the sheet, he calls for Clytemnestra that she come and with him feast her eyes upon the welcome sight. "She is already here!" exclaims Orestes; and Aegisthus, lifting the sheet, reads his own doom in the slain body of Agamemnon's murderess.

No one would care to hold a brief for von Hofmannsthal as against Sophocles. Whatever the modern writer has accomplished with "Electra," he is at best an adapter, not a creator. At least, however, he has selected from and not imposed himself upon the Greek, save in the last scene. Neither Aeschylus, Sophocles nor Euripides contains so much as a hint of the dance in which Electra, whirling in



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mad ecstasy over the avenging of her father's murder, herself collapses in death. That is von Hofmannsthal's conception and, especially for Strauss's purpose, it is a stroke of genius. In the version by Euripidies, Electra weds her brother's friend. Better by far the dance of death, however un-Greek it may be. A "happy ending" to "Electra" would seem like eating candy at a funeral.



Curious, is it not, that people accept all kinds of librettos no matter how neurotic and degenerate the heroines, so long as the music is easy to understand. But when a score is novel, when it marks a departure even from the last previous most modern word in music, when it requires, perchance, some little intellectual effort to grasp its purport, then they fall to discussing the libretto, analyzing it as minutely as if it were put forward as a great literary achievement, instead of being only the basis of a music drama. When a composer is attacked through the medium of the "book," it is pretty certain that posterity still will be found listening to his work. Wagner was attacked in the same way; Bayreuth still stands. Strauss has a large enough following for

another Bayreuth, were it necessary. The simple fact is that in "Electra" he secured from the playwright a thoroughly practicable piece of dramatic writing for his purpose; and that really is the beginning and end of the whole libretto question. But it is rather entertaining to note that, nowadays, in order to be considered too "advanced," one must go back to the fourth century before Christ.



Strauss is an opportunist, not a deliberate seeker after sensational effects. When he was over here, I met him and, in the course of conversation, he said he was planning a new music drama. I asked him what the subject was. He replied that he preferred to keep it a secret, because it was so obviously suited to effective musical setting that if he disclosed the subject, others immediately would seize upon it. This was "Salome." The morbid sensationalism coupled with it in the public mind is due largely to methods employed in its production at the Metropolitan Opera House.

When I saw Strauss, he had recently conducted his "Don Quixote," and there had been much in the papers concerning a passage in which he reproduced on the orchestra the bleating of sheep and another

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passage, the tilt with the windmill, in which he employed a theatrical wind machine. His comment was, "I did not write 'Don Quixote' because I wanted to make an orchestra bleat like a flock of sheep or to introduce a wind machine; I made my orchestra bleat and employed a wind machine because certain episodes in 'Don Quixote' called for these effects. I do not evade problems, I solve them." I think this simple statement and his attitude toward effects which present themselves to him, is worth reams of comment on theories—which he doesn't hold. To solve problems, not to evade them, ever has been the watchword of great men. Did Strauss write "Electra" because it offered him opportunity to imitate in music the strokes of the hatchet that had killed Agamemnon and the dragging of the body over the floor, as well as the tramping of the animals which Clytemnestra, after her nightmare, orders to be sacrificed? Not at all. The effects are suggested in the libretto; he has reproduced them in his music. They contribute in small part only to the realism of the score. That is due to his intellectual grasp of the subject.

I decline to accept such analysis and enumeration as bids me discover more than forty leading mo-

tives in Strauss's score and which reduce its discussion to terms of "IIIb" and "Cf. end of XVI A." Even granted that the score of "Electra" is a bundle of twitching nerves, why label every nerve like an anatomical chart and classify each twitch? How much finer the summing up to the score by a distinguished jurist, now the head of a great industrial corporation, who, when a friend of mine asked him for his impression of "Electra," exclaimed, "That wonderful music of disharmony!"



II

YES, "that wonderful music of disharmony!" A trained musician would have said "dissonance"—and not have expressed it nearly so well. Strauss is the only composer since Wagner who has done "big things" musically in a big way. The "big thing" he had to do in "Electra" was to delineate in music a woman so racked physically by indignities that have been heaped upon her—starvation, exposure and worse—that her mind is deranged; yet, because she is of royal blood, so obsessed with the one idea of vengeance upon her father's murderers, (her own mother and the latter's paramor) that her madness

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becomes, as it were, a lofty monomania and is not disclosed as madness until the maniacal dance, in which she celebrates vengeance achieved, and in the mad-Dervish gyrations of which, she drops dead in her tracks. The "big thing" to do musically in depicting such a character was to write a score of "disharmony," a score of nerves—music without epidermis, flesh or bones, but just nerves, quivering under each prod of poignant memory and more poignant hope.

Here and there it was necessary to pay a tribute to the mournful beauty in the character of Electra—daughter of a king, keeping herself alive on the food thrown to dogs, clothing her marred body in rags, her life at any moment in danger from those who are aware of her obsession, yet ever faithful to the one idea of retribution. There are episodes in which the score has to be pulled together, cease to quiver and become vibrant with deep and beautiful emotion. And this has been done by Strauss. He has solved the problem of sustained beauty as well as that of the creeping, shifting, ever on-coming madness, which Fate has chosen for its mask.

I have spoken of the passage in which, in her

first scene, Electra invokes the shade of Agamemnon. This woman, tossed like a wreck in the surge of her self-appointed passion—now in the high treble of shrieking objurgation, now in the trough of futile despair—her one mooring, to which again and again she returns, the grave of Agamemnon! In her slinking, wandering, hastening paces about the courtyard, that grave is her locale fixe. There her cries are not those of racked nerves, but of a bruised heart.



“Agamemnon!”—for accompaniment the voice is imposed upon a group formed of repetitions of the same note, with rising inflections in successive octaves. Nothing could be simpler; and nothing could come straighter from the heart and go straighter to it. Another scene of great beauty is the one with her sister, Chrysosthemis. Both believe their brother, who should be the chosen instrument of the gods for vengeance, dead. Electra implores her sister to dedicate her youth and her virginal strength to the task. Her own strength has been impaired by her physical and mental suffering. Unaided she may fail. To Chrysosthemis she promises marriage, children, all the joys of womanhood. She herself will be her slave and hand maiden, if only she will act with her in

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avenging their father's death. She, the elder sister, kneels before the younger and pleads to her. But Chrysosthemis is a normal woman. Her preference is to seek safety in escape from the palace rather than secure it by aiding Electra to kill her father's murderers. Finally in horror at Electra's uncanny persistence, she flees from the courtyard. Without pause, without thought of the consequence, Electra takes all upon herself—"Alors toute seule!"—and immediately proceeds to dig for the hatchet with which Agamemnon was killed and which she has buried in hopes of her brother's return.

While she is thus engaged Orestes, the news of whose death purposely has been spread by himself as a ruse, enters the court. The gradual recognition of brother and sister after the lapse of many years is one of the thrilling moments of music drama, while Electra's greeting of her brother is one of the sublimest passages in all music. That any one can listen to it without being stirred to the depths seems incredible.

There are in the score five or six phrases whose contour is sufficiently permanent to justify their being called leading motives. The compact, vigorous motive to which the curtains part and which, when heard

in minor, may be considered the Agamemnon motive, becomes, in major, the Orestes Call. It is repeated vigorously four times at the end of the action. Agamemnon, still unavenged, as the curtains part; Agamemnon, avenged, as they close. "Who will, may hear Sordello's story told"—"Who would, has heard Sordello's story told."



An artistic touch is the manner in which the dance is prepared for, so that it does not break in upon the action too abruptly. "And we, thine offspring, shall dance around thy tomb," sings Electra in one of her early scenes, while a searching dance rhythm carries out the suggestion in the orchestra. In the midst of the sisters' song of triumph, after Orestes has killed Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, that searching dance rhythm asserts itself more and more, until Electra fairly glides from ecstatic song into delirious dance.

Undoubtedly the orchestra at the Manhattan Opera House was held in too much. The score is more ferocious than there appeared. Save in passages of clear and intentional beauty, it should scratch and snarl and bite, or crash and rage with murder and the desire for vengeance. "I hear the voices—I still

hear the voices," Strauss is said to have protested at the rehearsals for the first performance in Dresden—an exaggerated way of suggesting that in many pages of the score the orchestra, with its vivid portrayal of what is transpiring, physically and psychologically, is of more importance than the voice. Without ever being ear-splitting, the orchestra should be a far more potential factor in the performance than it was here.



As it was, the triumph of the representations—the production occurring the evening of February 1st, 1910—belongs to the *Electra* of Mme. Mariette Mazarin. She is French, was born near Grenoble and studied at the Paris Conservatoire, where she received, all within the same year, the medals for song, opera comique, grand opera and solfeggio. She made her debut as *Aida* at the Grand Opera, Paris, where she sang two years, afterwards going to the Opera Comique for the same length of time. She has sung all through France and created *Salome* in French at Brussels. She also has in her repertoire several of the Wagnerian heroines, but prefers *Salome* and *Electra*. Indeed, "vaporeuses" was the term she ap-

pliced to the heroines of Wagner, in comparing them with those of Strauss, "who has made his persons just as they are, just as the music indicates—absolutely."



Verily the world moves on! Wagner's heroines "vaporeuses!" I cannot go quite so far as that. But were some one to say that, after "Electra," the Beethoven symphonies sound like the Rollo books, I might not object.

